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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002285

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SUBJECT: IRAQI JOURNALISTS PROTEST GOVERNMENT CRACKDOWN ON
FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

REF: BAGHDAD 2151

Classified By: Political Counselor Yuri Kim for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Iraqi journalists took to the streets on August 14 to protest a perceived Government of Iraq (GOI) crackdown on freedom of the press. Estimates of the number of participants in the demonstration range from 150 to 1,500. GOI police provided security for the event, and the demonstration was, by all accounts, peaceful and free of government interference or harassment. A journalist and organizer of the protest commented to Poloff that the "unexpected" success of the protest was a major step forward for cementing basic freedoms enshrined in the Iraqi constitution. It is unclear how the August 19 bombings and any GOI moves to tighten security might affect future protests. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

¶2. (SBU) On August 14, Iraqi journalists, politicians and intellectuals marched down Mutanabi Street in downtown Baghdad to protest what they view as a recent GOI crackdown on freedom of the press in Iraq. Last month the Council of Ministers approved a draft law aimed at protecting journalists' rights; the law met with scorn and condemnation from independent journalists and other concerned observers (reftel). MP Wa'el Abdul Latif (independent Shi'a) commented to Poloff August 11 that the draft law would face steep opposition when it is submitted to Parliament as it "reflects Saddam-era restrictions on the press and reminds us of Ba'athism." In addition, the GOI announced on August 2 that it would begin to limit Iraqis' access to certain websites deemed unsavory by the government. Finally, on August 4, journalist Ahmad Abdel Hussein was fired from his position at Sabah newspaper following publication of his article alleging that Vice President Adel Abdel Mehdi's bodyguard was behind a July 28 bank robbery in which eight security guards were killed and USD7 million was stolen.

¶3. (SBU) Differing reports place the number of people participating in the protest at anywhere from "dozens" (Associated Press) to "hundreds" (New York Times, Agence France Press) to "between 1,000-1,500," according to Ziyad Al-Ajili, director of the Iraqi-based NGO Journalist Freedoms Observatory (JFO) and one of the primary organizers of the event, though his estimate is likely inflated. Among those marching in solidarity with the journalists were MPs Zainab Al-Kenani (Sadrist) and Sabha Saedi (Fadhila), as well as Fouza Al-Troushi, Deputy Minister of Culture. The demonstration was conducted under heavy security from both the Iraqi Police (IP) and Army, which blocked off nearly all the streets in the neighborhood and ordered merchants to close their stores and stalls for the duration of the event. The demonstration was, by all accounts, peaceful and free of any government interference or harassment.

¶4. (C) Both the IP and the Iraqi Army's Baghdad Operations Command (BOC) provided security for the event. Al-Ajili praised the IP's assistance, though he criticized the BOC for requiring the shops to close (Note: This elicited a counter-demonstration by the shopkeepers against the

journalists. End note.)). Protesters carried placards and shouted slogans calling on PM Maliki's administration to increase protections for journalists. (Note: Three journalists have been killed in Iraq this year, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a U.S.-based NGO. End note.)).

15. (C) In an August 18 meeting, Al-Ajili expressed both his astonishment that the demonstration went off without a hitch and demonstrated a measure of pride in the success of Iraq's "first pro-freedom of expression protest." JFO was responsible for much of the demonstration's logistics, including sending advance notification, using the organization's website, traditional advertising, text messaging and word-of-mouth to alert people.

16. (C) Al-Ajili noted that the public was shocked at how peaceful the demonstration was and that the GOI permitted it to take place. The protest's aims, which he claimed were achieved, were to send the administration a clear message that independent journalists were "professionals" who could not be manipulated and that they are united in their support of freedom of the press. He predicted that the draft law submitted by the Council of Ministers will be soundly rejected by Parliament in September (Note: He also expressed JFO's intent to lobby heavily against the draft law. End note.)). Although he expects increased GOI pressure on journalists as campaign season begins in earnest next month, Al-Ajili does not foresee an increase in arrests or violence directed against the media.

17. (C) Comment: While we should not ascribe outside

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importance to the August 14 demonstration, it is noteworthy that the GOI allowed it to take place without incident. Recent weeks have witnessed a number of measures aimed at curtailing journalists' rights and Iraqis' freedom of expression. Though participants refrained from any direct criticism of PM Maliki, their message was clearly directed toward the government: we are unified, we demand to be taken seriously, and we will not be silent. Al-Ajili, normally pessimistic and gloomy, was uncharacteristically upbeat a few days after the march. It remains to be seen what impact the August 19 bombings and any subsequent GOI moves to tighten security will have on future demonstrations. End comment.
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